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ABSTRACT

Pressed by the vise created by the "era of accountability" and evolving theory which emphasizes constructing meaning and problem solving, educators have become more articulate about defending the classroom impact of new theory. Assessment in the classroom is following contemporary descriptions of learning, thinking, and language use as "processes"--or even one inseparable process. At the same time, the public's concern with academic achievement may have slowed real improvement in education. The result of the use of short-answer or selected-answer assessments has been a narrowing of the curriculum, exacerbated by textbook authors and publishers pressured to structure materials to reflect the content of achievement tests. In the language arts, there is a spreading emphasis on using portfolios as an alternative assessment. In this approach, assessment becomes instruction because students are learning to assess themselves. Many state and local school districts across the country are also experimenting with "performance" or "authentic" tests. Authors and publishers of assessment materials have begun to produce textbooks and instructional materials which cut across content areas. Educators now have a wider, richer selection of materials and ideas to match to the theories to which they subscribe. (RS)

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Theory Meets Practice in Language Arts Assessment

by Roger Farr and Bruce Tone

Assessment in the classroom is following contemporary descriptions of learning, thinking, and language use as "processes"—or even one inseparable "process." Accruing theory that stresses process and integration recommends and promotes instruction that 1) crosses different subject matter; 2) combines various kinds of thinking; and 3) integrates the different language behaviors (Herman et al. 1992).

The theory further emphasizes that "thinking" or problem solving should be a major focus for instruction; another emphasis is a focus on performance—application of the information and strategies that students learn to situations that are real and meaningful for them. The curricula that are evolving in schools that embody these beliefs emphasize "ideas" and the reasons for understanding and expressing them. Reading and listening comprehension and effective speaking and writing are defined by such theory as nearly identical "meaning-constructing" processes (Wiggins, 1993).

Theory into Practice

Perhaps surprisingly, the public's concern with academic achievement may have actually slowed real improvement in education. The public belief that students' academic achievement has been on the decline was nurtured by a slow but long-term decline in scores on standardized tests. The most commonly used data available for making comparisons across time has been the "SAT," an assessment designed to screen students interested in going to college. The annual SAT score reports emphasized the continuing decline; and even in the light of certain factors, such as the increasing number of students taking such tests, the public's concern seemed valid. The decline on the SAT and other tests, coupled with concern about dropouts, drugs, student discipline, and increased school taxes, created a highly publicized demand for school accountability. In response to the perceived decline in education, local and state education policy makers, instituted "minimum essentials" testing programs (Afflerbach, 1990; Farr, 1992).

Presumably these tests have held schools and teachers accountable by measuring what many educators and the public believe is being—or should be—emphasized in the schools. However, many of the tests have attempted to isolate and categorize both knowledge and sub-behaviors of processes like reading and writing. The testing goal is to report on "objectives" that are easily targeted for practice and which, on the test, are measured by multiple-choice questions. Application and strategy use has presumably been assessed by these tests as students attempt to choose a correct answer from several choices. In the opinion of many educators, such responses to the public's concern for accountability have not been compatible with either education as problem solving or with language use as the construction of meaning.

The result of the use of short-answer or selected-answer assessments has been a narrowing of the curriculum. That this would happen is understandable. When the accountability assessments were instituted, teachers studied the tests to see what was being assessed since they, as well as the students, were being held accountable for the test results. Is it any wonder that many teachers have emphasized what the tests cover and have modeled instruction after them?

Since such tests emphasize the recognition of answers and cannot determine if a student can develop his/her own response, or whether a student can refocus a problem, the instructional emphasis in many classrooms has grown narrower. This narrowing of the curriculum was exacerbated by textbook authors and publishers who were pressured to structure textbooks and instructional materials that reflect the content and skills emphasized on the tests. Such textbooks and other materials provide learning activities that mimic what the tests have asked students to do. Students have been led, by both published materials and their teachers, to practice isolated objectives and fractured skills applied to sentence-long ideas presented to them (Wiggins, 1993).

How much meaning construction does such an instructional emphasis promote? What applications of knowledge and learned behavior does it foster? How well do such opportunities reflect genuine student interests, information needs, and purposes for reading and writing?

One reason that current times are so interesting for educators is that the conflicting phenomena just described have created "tension." Pressed in the vise created by what has been called "the era of accountability," which emphasizes recognition and right answers, and by evolving theory which emphasizes constructing meaning and problem solving, educators have become more articulate

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about defending the classroom impact of the new theory. There has been an exceptionally keen interest in both process-oriented instruction and process-oriented evaluation of its effect. The concern with more valid forms of assessment has led to the search for "alternative assessments," that is for alternatives to the commonly used and highly publicized multiple-choice, standardized tests (Smith, 1991).

Portfolios and Assessment

In the language arts, there is a spreading emphasis on using portfolios (where students collect, organize, and analyze samples of their work) as an alternative assessment (Farr and Tone, 1994). In this approach, assessment becomes instruction because students are learning to assess themselves. In many classrooms, they do so in response to their personal goals, objectives, needs, and interests (Tierney, 1991).

One of the most important outcomes of the widespread interest in portfolio assessment is that it endorses the reliance on teacher and student judgment. This same regard, however, raises questions about how well portfolio assessment can serve the public's interest in how accountable schools (and their teachers) are. The public, the media, legislators, and employers have been enthusiastic about assessment that has students "apply" what they know; but many understand and trust the fact that multiple-choice tests are normed. Scores on such tests can be compared to how similar students from across the nation perform, and that makes such audiences "more assured about their students' achievements."

Portfolios have evolved as individualized and personalized collections of students' achievements, but they do not solve the need for comparability and for educational accountability in the eyes of many education policy makers and the public. On the other hand, the multiple-choice tests have been criticized for emphasizing recognition over construction and for failing to emphasize problem solving. This dilemma has led to the tryout of new forms of assessments which have fallen under the heading of "performance" or "authentic" tests. Both these and portfolios are being used in different subject areas.

One general form of performance assessment that has evolved emphasizes process by having a student read several texts in order to construct a response to a general problem. The purpose is defined in terms of a problem to be solved, and an audience for the writing task is assigned; but both are designed to seem authentic to the student. The criteria for scoring how students organize and develop their responses can be carefully described, and examples of student responses that match different scores can be selected for scorers to follow. This system can be tested to assure that raters who follow the criteria and refer to the example papers give the same—or nearly the same—ratings to the same papers. Thus an assessment that promotes the actual processing of problem solving and idea construction can be made reliable as well (Farr and Tone, 1994).

Many state and local school districts across the country are experimenting with the kind of performance assessment just described. A few are experimenting with ways to use and evaluate portfolios for large-scale assessment as well. The intention has not been to replace or discontinue standardized multiple-choice tests, but the interest in alternative forms of assessment appears to be a desire to get at the "application" of student learning (Wiggins, 1993).

In response to this trend, authors and publishers of assessment and other educational materials have begun to produce textbooks and instructional materials which cut across content areas, emphasize the construction of meaning and problem solving, and encourage collaborative learning. The new instructional materials and assessments being developed seem to be in sync with each other and with theory and common sense which emphasize the value of purpose and integration in learning. That is, they hold a view of the students as thinkers and problem solvers rather than as empty vessels to be filled with specific information carefully prescribed by a curriculum guide

So now educators have a wider, richer selection of materials and ideas to match to the theories to which they subscribe. They can also read about educational theory, different instructional approaches, and educational issues and problems, which will, hopefully, reflect the increasingly collective determination of educators to have their students learn by doing—doing something that has genuine value and relevance for them. Such choices underline the excitement of education in the 1990s.

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